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AUTHOR Shaughnessy, Michael F.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the literature and practice (especially in New Mexico) concerning reading instruction of gifted children. It considers early or "precocious" reading, instruction in the early grades, and identification of the gifted in New Mexico. Reading teachers in New Mexico are urged to be aware of specific conflicts in the area of gifted identification and gifted instruction. The seven intelligences identified by H. Gardner are listed. The appropriateness of traditional basal reading programs for this population is questioned. A variety of literacy activities are encouraged, including guest speakers in the classroom, tie-ins of books with television or movies, student creative writing, investigatory activities, and activities which develop higher order thinking skills. (Contains 14 references.) (DB)

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GIFTED AND READING

MICHAEL F. SHAUGHNESSY
JANNA SIEGEL
NILE V. STANLEY
EASTERN NEW MEXICO UNIVERSITY
PORTALES, NEW MEXICO 88130

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This article discusses reading patterns and concerns of gifted children. It begins with the identification of early readers and discusses issues and concerns relative to precocious readers. Current gifted assessment and instructional practices are reviewed as well as some issues that need to be addressed. It then discusses the maintenance of reading skills in childhood and adolescence. Lastly, implications for gifted instruction are reviewed.

EARLY READERS AND GIFTEDNESS

Often referred to as " precocious " , many gifted children develop accelerated reading abilities. It is not known exactly how some two, three, or four year old children begin to read. They pick up a book and read independently, while others are able to read magazines, then newspapers, then books with some assistance from parents.

Some children are able to maintain these early gains and continue to read with comprehension and speed for many years. However, very little research has been done in this area.

Obviously, these children have a superior I.Q. and a supportive home environment.

In the home, parents often expose these children to a wide variety of materials- picture books, books, magazines, newspapers and supplementary reading materials.

The mother apparently is the focal person in this realm. Mothers seem to provide an opportunity for children to interact with letters, sounds, words, sentences, consonants and vowels, as well as book related concepts such as title, chapter, beginning and ending.

In some environments, there are specific reading kits and programs which are used in the home. There are " Book of the Month " clubs specifically designed for children and preschoolers.

Parents seem to read to children early and they read quite a lot to them.

In some instances, this early proclivity seems to gradually fade and diminish, calling into question early reading programs for precocious readers and gifted readers.

EARLY GRADE INSTRUCTION

Some sensitive teachers recognize early gifted readers and early giftedness. Very perceptive teachers individualize instruction for these children and alter their instruction to individualize the level of instruction and the type of reading materials provided for these students. Many teachers work tirelessly to meet these students accelerated needs.

Sadly, on the other hand, many teachers are not trained to recognize these early precocious readers. On the other hand, they may recognize these precocious readers, yet not know exactly what to do with these students. So, they are placed in standard reading instructional groups and they "fail to thrive " in that environment.

Still other teachers recognize precocious readers and seek assistance from specialists in the fields as to how best to work with these students.

They consult with specialists in the field of reading, and read books relevant to this topic.

THE STATUS QUO OF GIFTED IN NEW MEXICO

Currently in New Mexico, the assessment procedures for identifying the gifted are primarily carried out by a certified educational diagnostician. The New Mexico State Board of Education (SBE) Standards for Excellence Compliance Manual, (1992, p. 44) specifies that children who are gifted :

means a school-age child whose measured intelligence quotient, either verbal or nonverbal, measures at least two standard deviations above the mean on an intelligence test (IQ= or greater than 130) and who meets at least one of the following criteria : (1) a score of at least ninety fifth percentile or above on the total battery score of a standardized achievement test; (2) outstanding creativity or divergent thinking; and (3) outstanding critical thinking or problem solving on a test.

In the eastern portion of the state the SBE regulation typically translates into this assessment protocol :

Gifted = IQ= 130 or above (using either the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children III, or the Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children or the Stanford Binet- 4 th Edition)

Achievement= 95 Percentile Rank or above on one scale (i.e. math, reading, etc) on and individually administered achievement test (Woodcock-Johnson Achievement Test, or Peabody Individual Achievement Test-Revised)

Creative and/or Critical Thinking = 95 th Percentile Rank or above (Structure of the Intellect)

After the formal identification criteria are met, the child is placed in the gifted program through the special education program. The current instructional practices for the gifted child in New Mexico is again regulated by the SBE compliance Manual section, the I.E.P.-- Individualized Education Plan. In typical practice, the recommended instructional adaptations for the gifted include enrichment, ability grouping, and/or grade skipping.

CONFLICTS TO BE ADDRESSED AND RESOLVED

In New Mexico, as elsewhere, current gifted practices often lag behind " state of the art " theory, therefore, reading teachers should be made aware of the following conflicts to be resolved :

Problems with Gifted Identification

1. The formal nomination, referral, identification, and placement process can take months, and even years according to some disgruntled parents.

2. In some schools, minority, language different, and/or culturally deprived children may not meet the rigid gifted criteria as specified by the State Rules and Regulations. Many diagnosticians lack the training, time, and/ or resources in terms of tests to optimally assess the culturally diverse.

3. Gifted is narrowly defined basically as high verbal or high performance ability. Under the present system, the highly gifted child in music, art, athletics, drama, etc might go unrecognized and intellectually undernourished and understimulated.

Problems with Gifted Instruction

1. There are very limited gifted programs. In many schools, the " enrichment " program consists of only one hour per week. Teachers receive little training or compensation. A few packaged programs (i.e. " Odessey of the Mind " and " Structure of the Intellect ") dominate, while mentorships and other collaborations are almost non existant.

2. Minority and language different students are underrepresented in gifted programs.

3. Gifted programs are narrow in focus. Math, science, and computer enrichment seem to predominate. Gifted nonverbal students need vocabulary, reading and study skills development.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Recent research by Stanley, Siegel, Cooper and Marshall (in press) and Stanley (1993) conclude that rather than asking " Is that child gifted ? teachers should ask " How is that child gifted ? " by finding and nurturing the unique gifts in every child. Using dynamic assessment procedures,

based upon the Soviet psychologist Vygotsky's " zone of proximal development (ZPD)" which measures the difference

between what a learner can do alone, and what they can do with appropriate guidance, assistance and supervision, researchers are focusing on the nature of the teaching processes that foster and maintain giftedness. Rather than asking " Who qualifies as gifted ? ", researchers are more interested in finding " Which students can benefit from gifted instruction ? ". Preliminary finding indicated that

when non-gifted children are given " gifted " instruction through a " test-teach-test " paradigm their potential for success is more accurately predicted than when using traditional tests alone.

Giftedness is no longer defined simply by high scores on IQ and achievement tests or having straight " A's " in school. Giftedness is the potential for sustained, creative accomplishments in any number of fields that society values. A broader view of what giftedness is challenges teachers to identify each child's unique interests, talents, and strengths and consider ways to nourish that unique potential. Gardner (1983) recommended that teachers/parents identify each child's best characteristics by providing opportunities for developing his/her potential in the major areas-- known as the seven intelligences. These are :

- 1) Linguistic Intelligence- The Scribe : Child enjoys reading and writing. Has many favorite books. Writes poems, jingles and stories. Likes learning new words and concepts.
- 2) Musical Intelligence-- The Musician : Respond to music by tapping rhythms, freely joins in by singing, dancing, or playing an instrument.
- 3) Logical-Mathematical Intelligence- The Thinker : Becomes intensely involved with solving brainteasers, word problems and calculations
- 4) Spatial Intelligence-- The Engineer/Sculptor . Plays chess, draws, paints, molds clay, builds models, takes things apart.
- 5) Bodily-Kinesthetic- The Athlete/Performer. Plays sports, active in the performing arts; drama and dance.
- 6) The Personal Intelligence- The Philosopher/Psychologist : Has deep understanding of self and is very reflective. Analyzes people.
- 7) The Social Intelligence-- The Teacher/Politician. Enjoys working with people rather than things. Seeks social situations.

INSTRUCTIONAL CONCERNS

For the early gifted reader, both the teacher and the parents have many concerns regarding their children as they enter the public school system. Many teachers and specialists question whether or not traditional basal reading programs are appropriate for the gifted students.

Still others question whether boys and girls differ in their reading preferences and whether they should be treated differently.

Many teachers assign special outside projects for gifted readers. While other students are reading " Dick and Jane " and SRA program books, teachers ask other gifted students to read Nancy Drew and The Hardy Boys for example. Many teachers give special assignments to students to go to the local public library and procure books that they find of interest.

Burns, Collins and Paulsell (1991) compared intellectually superior preschool accelerated readers and non readers and found that many teachers provide 'basal reading instruction " to accelerated readers in spite of the fact that they had been identified as precocious. Their question is " is our educational system meeting the needs of young accelerated readers as they enter the system? (p.41) McCormick and Swassing (1982) found that many school districts do not have programs for the gifted in terms of reading improvement due to " lack of information about what constitutes a good reading program for the gifted. (p. 42) Indeed, there is little out there in this area. Carr (1984) has suggested the following factors as important in gifted instruction for precocious readers : pacing of instruction, content, integration with other language arts and the inclusion and infusion of thinking skills.

ENRICHMENT FOR GIFTED READERS

Joseph Renzulli (1978) has offered a triadic model for gifted students. He has indicated that giftedness is comprised of " above average ability ", " task commitment " and creativity. There are several types of literacy activities that can be used to foster reading and reading development.

These include three types of activities.

1) Type I : Literacy Activities.

Teachers can use guest speakers in the classroom. Individuals such as authors, publishers, editors, journalists, newspaper columnists, reporters, illustrators, screen writers, playwrights, anchorpeople from the local news station and cartoonists have much to share and can encourage reading and advise gifted (and other students) about possible job options in the field. Commercial artists and advertisement writers can also provide a salient perspective for readers and indicate the importance of reading.

Certain television programs and films, if judiciously chosen can provide incentive to read. PBS Specials, Masterpiece Theatre specials and various movies about writers (eg. The Great Gatsby) and movies made from books are all avenues for teacher and student exploration. Gifted students, in particular can employ this venue via independent study projects.

Assemblies can also encourage reading. Some schools have " book fairs " during certain holiday periods and other schools have these fairs to celebrate certain heros and holidays (for example, Martin Luther King Day, Lincoln, Columbus Day and Washington's Day).

There are a number of creative activities which can be used to spark interest. Students can make their own books and staple the finish product. There are various word processing programs which will help students in this area- for example, Bank Street Writer and other programs have been most successful in this area. Some periodicals have a section devoted to student writing.

TYPE II: Literacy Activities

This type of endeavors employ more active " hands on " experiences to foster reading. Gifted students (and many others) enjoy investigations, book reports, science projects and other investigatory activities. The library can be used as a source of information and can provide a wealth of reference materials which can be beneficial to students in the long run. Students can procure resources from Washington and can learn the scientific method and process of hypothesis setting and testing.

By presenting the results of their projects students can learn a number of other crucial skills. Students can give

presentations (either in a group or independently) or deliver speeches or present discussions. In some instances, students can provide performances and act out the reading of certain plays they have researched.

With gifted students, it is almost crucial to enhance higher order thinking skills. Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill & Krathwohl, 1956) has provided a framework to enhance these cognitive domains. In order to enhance higher level thinking, the following activities are suggested to enhance the various levels of Bloom's taxonomy :

APPLICATION

Writing books, stories, poems, articles
Drawing illustrations and cartoons
Editing and publishing student work
Sending out writing to magazines and journals

ANALYSIS

Making a print ad or commercial advertising a story
Designing costumes for characters
Writing from a character's point of view
Rewriting the ending to a story

SYNTHESIS

Writing a story using characters from different stories
Converting a story to a play
Performing scenes from a book
Writing a story in a historical context

EVALUATION

Writing critical review of books or films
Perform as T.V. or Movie Critics
Complie an annotated bibliography
Review other critical review

TYPE III: Literacy Activities

Independent Study

Read books from the same author
Write a diary, journal or book
Reseach an area of interest
Explore, in depth, a career option (eg, phlebotomy)

PROBLEM SOLVING

School Concerns
Society Matters
Community Assistance
Talent Shows
Assemblies
School Activities
Student Assistance

GROUP SKILLS

Cooperative Learning
Competitive Learning
Social Skills

The above are obviously general guidelines and can be modified for different types of students from different socio-economic groups. The teacher's creativity is also important as he or she modifies and experiments with the above global guidelines.

AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEACH

We are obviously concerned about gifted students and early precocious readers. However, psychologists and developmentalists do not exactly understand exactly why precocious readers develop.

However, primary school teachers need to know how to recognize, test, monitor and nurture precocious readers. Teachers very strongly feel that they need additional help and support and training in this area and that their training has simply not prepared them to work with a child in the first grade who is reading at a fifth grade level.

Fehrenback (1991) has determined that gifted students employ different reading strategies than " average " students. She found that gifted infer more, analyze structure, evaluate, predict, re-read, and relate what they are reading to content area (what they have already read). Average readers, as might be expected spent more time attempting to pronounce unknown words and sadly, summarized inaccurately what they have read. One important element of this study is the fact that the gifted students were able to re-read the material presented in the study. Thus, speed is one quantitative factor that differentiates gifted from average students. The salience of these results is simply that because gifted readers have been probably reading for many years, and have read more, they read faster, and can

better integrate what they read into their existing cognitive structures (Shaughnessy, 1990)

There is much concern about " basal readers " and whether these are appropriate for gifted readers and precocious readers. Do " basal readers " interfere with the natural progress of gifted readers?

Do boys and girls differ in this domain ? If so, how? These are questions that need research.

What teaching practices should be used for precocious readers ? What are the optimal procedures and what are the most efficacious ?

The difference between giftedness and early precociousness in reading must be explored more deeply.

Unfortunately, the average classroom or even average school does not contain a large number of precocious readers or identified gifted children. We do not have a very large data or research base regarding these readers.

What specific teaching practices should be used for precocious readers ? Teachers do not want to dampen the interest of students. On the other hand, we do not want to discourage the development of natural interests. Much more research is needed in this sensitive area and more work needs to be done to help reading teachers and classroom teachers help the gifted, the near gifted and the early gifted reader.

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Michael F. Shaughnessy is Associate Professor of Psychology.
Janna L. Siegel is Assistant Professor of Special Education.
Nile V. Stanley is Associate Professor of Reading Education
and Past President of New Mexico I.R.A.